

In my column of September 18, 2010, I praised the Nebraska Department of Roads for utilizing native grasses and wildflowers along our roadsides. I pointed out the NDOR has a big responsibility for keeping our roadways safe. In addition, the NDOR must design and maintain roadside ditches.

A ditch's primary purpose is to control the drainage from the road surface and surrounding area. It also must be planted with vegetation that creates a sustainable landscape, while creating a habitat for assorted wildlife and providing aesthetic appeal to motorists passing by. The aesthetic appeal of NDOR's work has caught my attention once again.



With road construction on Coal Chute Road, my current daily trek to work from Minden to Kearney has been driving north on U.S. Highway 10 to the I-80 interchange. There, I hop the interstate heading west. Within a few short miles, I jump off at the Great Platte River Road Archway Monument, Exit # 275. While on this exit ramp, I've been captivated by the thousands, perhaps millions, of delicate, sky-blue flowers gently waving

in the breeze along the roadside. This blue flowering plant is scientifically called *Linum lewissii*, more commonly known as prairie flax or blue flax. It's actually a perennial wildflower, native to the United States and grows with great success here in Nebraska. An individual flower has five petals and measures approximately one inch in diameter. Each blossom lasts only one day, but a new flower will open the next day to take its place. The flower opens in the early morning just before dawn. Unless the day is overcast, the fully open flower drops its petals by midday. This plant successively blooms to mid-summer on a daily basis.



Rita and I have attempted growing blue flax in our landscape numerous times, but each time it has ended in failure. Although it is a perennial, our plantings never last more than a year. Having conducted a little research, I think I now know why we've been unsuccessful in keeping blue flax alive in our flower borders.

The key to its success, like all plants, is assuring the right growing conditions. Most wildflowers prefer poorer soils. Sandy, clay and rocky soils seem to achieve the best results. Soil too rich in organic matter may cause blue flax to perform poorly. Furthermore, blue flax prefers dry soil. Although the soil in our home landscape is very fertile and organically rich, making it perfect to grow many other flowers successfully, it is perhaps too rich and fertile for blue flax to thrive. Furthermore, although I hate to admit it, we are often guilty of overwatering our landscape. All this, along with the special attention we've given to growing blue flax, has more than likely led to its early demise.

On the other hand, if one's landscape is designed for low maintenance, more of a natural setting, blue flax would be a great selection. Many plant retailers carry this plant as seedlings, or one can purchase seed for sowing directly into the soil. It's obvious the NDOR discovered this knowledge about growing blue flax long ago. I'm convinced that should I take this same exit next year around this same time, these little blue beauties will again be blooming their heads off.

NDOR claims that plants growing along Nebraska's roadside ditches occur either naturally, such as being carried in by the wind, water or wild life, or have been intentionally planted. In either case, the vegetation that is allowed to grow is designed to benefit the public in numerous ways. Aesthetics is one of those benefits.

I'm quite sure the blue flax growing near I-80 Exit # 275 was planted intentionally by NDOR. They did it knowing that roadside ditches provide ideal growing conditions for wild flowers. They also did it to create an attractive appearance. Thank you again, NDOR, for a job well done!